

Close-Up: Sexuality, Eroticism, and Gender in Black Films and New Media

Between Women TV: Toward the Mainstreaming of Black Lesbian Masculinity and Black Queer Women in Community

MARLON RACHQUEL MOORE

Abstract

*This essay argues that writer Michelle Daniel and director Christina Brown employ the Internet as a small-screen platform to disrupt hegemonic media constructions of women's same-sex eroticism and queer identities. Daniel and Brown, with the creation of the dramatic web series *Between Women*, and the ongoing expansion of it into the "network" *Between Women TV*, cultivate a digital environment wherein black lesbians and bisexual women are portrayed on a spectrum of characterization, and are situated in community with each other and in a broader African American context. It includes a brief overview of black lesbian- and bisexual-identified characters in television serials and Hollywood productions.*

In 2012, creative partners Michelle Daniel and Christina Brown announced to more than 100,000 YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter followers that they were withholding the release of the highly anticipated third season of their web serial *Between Women* because they were negotiating a television contract with a "major network."¹ They had only begun publicizing the black-cast drama a year earlier through social media marketing and teasers on YouTube, and quickly gained a large following. In fact, the premiere webisode was delayed for hours because more than 3,000 viewers tried to access it simultaneously, causing the website to crash.¹ Following that announcement, in 2013, they launched *BetweenWomenTV*, a web platform, or digital network, with a (free) subscription requirement. The site features all three seasons of the show, in addition to a growing number of other artists' independently produced filmic projects, which are also black-cast, queer women—

focused and women-authored productions. It is not clear if a broadcast television network deal continues to be in development or if it has fallen through altogether because, in June 2014, Brown also launched a Kickstarter crowd-sourcing campaign to raise \$100,000 for a feature-length film adaptation. The justification she gives on the Kickstarter page suggests that Brown has her sights set on a broader cultural horizon. She writes:

This is a win-win situation. It would only take a few days to film, it would give the fans their favorite characters back, and a movie has the potential to really tap into the mainstream market with the right plan of execution. . . . The next biggest challenge is distribution of "Between Women the Movie." We want to open the door to African-American LGBTQI films and content on TV, Netflix, iTunes, Redbox, BestBuy, Walmart, and cable TV. We are working with a company that specializes in distribution to get our film in these places, but of course, it costs money too!²

While the crowdsourcing effort was unsuccessful, Brown's expressed desire to tap into mainstream audiences is an important creative, social and political endeavor, the implications of which I intend to explore.

In the digital age where distribution platforms, such as Amazon and Netflix, pose a serious threat to broadcast television in the competition for audiences, the potential for the burgeoning network *BetweenWomenTV* to impact popular culture should not be discounted. According to Daniel, her webisodes have garnered over a million views, a fact that she believes is evidence that the audience continues to grow by word of mouth.³ So, for the purpose of this essay, I will hold open a space for multiple possibilities: that *BetweenWomenTV* will continue to accumulate content and become the black queer woman's YouTube or, for a television analogy, the Logo network for the web; that the series will premiere on broadcast television eventually; or that Michelle Brown will get the kinds of creative opportunities she envisions for herself. Using that space of possibility as my premise, this discussion will focus on the content of the series and how it has the potential to advance the representation of black lesbian and bisexual characters into a new phase of what is called, in media studies, the social mainstreaming process.

The social mainstreaming process and its impact, called the mainstreaming effect, are concerned with the characterization, disposition, and level of inclusion of socially marginalized characters on prime-time television.⁴ The mainstreaming effect describes the relationship between media depictions and mainstream society's perceptions of those minority populations.⁵ To enter this discussion, I use terminology regarding the phases of media representation from a study of gay and bisexual television characters published by Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas, who themselves adapted Gordon Berry's

1980 report on the evolution of the depictions of black television characters.⁶ Below, Raley and Lucas explain how Berry's three categories of mainstreaming can be applied to lesbian and gay characters:

The stereotypical portrayal of gay males and lesbians would place them in Berry's *Stereotypic Age*. Berry's second period, the *New Awareness*, would require that gay male and lesbian characters be shown in supporting and leading roles where their positive attributes are highlighted. Berry's third and final period, *Stabilization*, would be evidenced by shows consisting primarily of gay male and lesbian characters in the same way as Berry noted that shows such as *Good Times* contained almost exclusively Black characters. Additionally, programs during the Stabilization period would tend to be more realistic portrayals of the personal problems facing gay male and lesbian characters.⁷

The significance of the mainstreaming process and its effects on public discourse and mainstream perceptions should not be underestimated.

Decades of study show the impact that film, video, and television portrayals have on the ways their audiences perceive minority groups. The messages they relay "either directly or in the guise of entertainment, serve to create, confirm, and cultivate [on-screen] viewpoints and values in the [viewing] audience."⁸ Because, by definition, numerical minorities are not as visible in the social spheres of the dominant culture, pop culture productions often function as substitutes for actual encounters between individuals. This state of affairs can "create, confirm, and cultivate" stereotypes and prejudices in the dominant culture and affect the real-life outcomes of individuals within those mis- or poorly represented groups. To paraphrase cultural critic bell hooks, television, cinema, and now web serials may not intend to teach us anything, but something is always learned from them.⁹ Whether those behind the camera intend to or not, they teach us which lives to value and which to discard which voices should be heard and which we should ignore. In fact, the mainstreaming effect is so insidious that advocacy groups, such as the (Jewish) Anti-Defamation League, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), and the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), each have an arm of their organization dedicated to monitoring and addressing media depictions. Whereas undeniable strides have been made in the past forty years in the variegation of character types along the lines of race, class and sexuality, depictions of African American ciswomen who are lesbian, bisexual or sexually fluid remain limited.

Statistically, queer representation in mainstream scripted television serials is on the rise.¹⁰ GLAAD compiles the statistics for LGBT representation on the five main networks (ABC, CBS, The CW, Fox, and NBC) and premium networks HBO and Showtime in its annual report, *Where We Are on TV*. Re-

garding the 2011–2012 broadcast season, GLAAD reported that 2.9 percent of the regular characters in scripted roles were identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. They anticipated an increase in the 2012–2013 season to 4.4 percent (based on network-provided descriptions of upcoming shows). GLAAD president Herndon Griddick asserts that messages relayed through television depictions also reflect a minority group's proximity to real life respect and acceptance in the mainstream culture. He states in a press release, "This year's increase of LGBT characters on television reflects a cultural change in the way gay and lesbian people are seen in our society. More and more Americans have come to accept their LGBT family members, friends, coworkers, and peers, and as audiences tune into their favorite programs, they expect to see the same diversity of people they encounter in their daily lives."¹¹ With that in mind, what do the statistics mean for the gender and racial disparities, which remain an issue? Of the forecasted increase in presence, 79 percent of the LGBT characters are white and 61 percent are male. While blacks accounted for 9 percent of all television characters in the fall 2011–2012 prime-time lineup, none of the LGBT regular or recurring characters in a scripted series (excluding HBO or Showtime) were black."¹² These numbers suggest that viewers (and writers and directors) do not yet abundantly imagine the lives of their black lesbian relatives, peers, and co-workers.

Even so, black queer female representation does and has existed. Acknowledging this brings us back to the stages of the social mainstreaming process. In the next section, I will demonstrate how and where they have appeared on television and (in a brief tangential mention) Hollywood films. Then, in closing, I analyze the first season of *Between Women* and make the argument that its content demonstrates the stabilization for the masculine black lesbian figure in particular, and in its representation of black queer women in community more generally.

It merits mention that a correlative black lesbian invisibility also exists in theatrically released films, a void that the web serial also seems to fill. While a full examination of this aspect of filmic history is beyond the scope of this essay, one example from recent history makes clear the efficiency of the small screen as an alternative medium. Television portrayals can challenge big-screen obscurity and reach more of the target audience than independently produced and distributed films, for example. Cheryl Dunye staged one such pop-cultural intervention with the made-for-cable drama, *Stranger Inside* (2001), which she cowrote and codirected. Dunye collaborated with HBO Films after her first feature, an interracial lesbian romance, *Watermelon Woman* (1996), tanked at the box office in spite of having garnered multiple awards on the independent film circuit. *Stranger* gazes unflinchingly into the lives of women in prison to demonstrate their negotiations with incarceration.

tion through the formation of kinship networks. As Maria St. John incisively describes it:

Paying homage to the [prison film] genre, *Stranger* makes butch-femme culture both central to prison life and crucial to survival. Through its portrayal of the interdependence of various characters and subcultures, *Stranger* presents a range of relationships to institutionalization that challenge dominant frames of reference regarding race and sex, love and loyalty, and violence and power. Binary oppositions such as guilt versus innocence, sociality versus criminality, naïveté versus cynicism, and black versus white, which have organized traditional prison films, refuse in this one to stand apart; instead they mingle, merge, and mutate before Dunye's lens.¹³

Dunye minces no words about her professional and political motivations in an interview conducted by Kathleen Wilkinson shortly after the HBO premiere. Wilkinson relates that Dunye "laments the paucity of riveting African American features" and is "disappoint[ed]" in the lack of "good storytelling" in black-cast features,¹⁴ an interesting choice of words after a 1990s decade that, arguably, could be described as the neoblack-cast era for Hollywood films.

According to Wilkinson, Dunye was referring specifically to the cross-over success (which also translates to financial success) of her contemporary Terry McMillan, a novelist whose best-selling works had been adapted for television and film.¹⁵ McMillan's narratives privilege heterosexual black women's friendships. Dunye's box office disappointment with *Watermelon Woman* occurred between McMillan's three successful films but, notably, it also appeared *alongside* the moderate box office success of *Boys on the Side*, a romantic comedy in which Whoopi Goldberg is the sole black cast member and plays an unattached lesbian. On the heels of *Watermelon Woman*, F. Gary Gray found blockbuster success with a bank heist thriller, *Set It Off* (dir. F. Gary Gray, 1996), which prominently includes a lesbian couple in the cast. Cleo (Queen Latifah) is a masculine-presenting lesbian and one of the four central women characters; the others either have on-screen heterosexual relationships or heterosexual histories that are indicated in various ways. Although Cleo and her romantic partner are shown being affectionate, their relationship is not an important part of the plot. This mixed bag of success stories undermines the notion that *Watermelon Woman* was not popular with moviegoing audiences because the protagonist was a black woman. Rather, it points to the "problem" of centralizing the romantic life of a black lesbian. Indeed, the small screen of HBO, for Dunye, served as an alternative, financially less risky medium in which she could situate the black lesbian protagonist in "an array of female masculinities . . . [which] are por-

trayed not as stigma but as signs of strength and pride.”¹⁶ Showtime’s *L Word* series would appear three years later. Not since *Stranger Inside* has television or film delivered a nuanced fictional portrayal of a black lesbian community. So, for now, the masculine-presenting lesbian, or black dyke, remains underrepresented.¹⁷ Though black lesbians have appeared in television sitcoms and dramas in recent decades, most of the depictions fall in either the Stereotypic or New Awareness categories.

A Glance at Black Dykes, Girly Lesbians, and Various Bisexuals in American Television

***What’s Happening!* (ABC, 1976–79); revived as *What’s Happening Now!* (syndicated, 1985–88)**

Every week for six seasons in total, television viewers tuned in to see stand-up comedian Shirley Hemphill portray working class female masculinity. Shirley, also the character’s name, is an un-Mammy figure who, in the early seasons, could be seen as a counterpoint to the maternal figure on the show, Mabel Thomas (Mabel King). On the surface of things, each embodies the modern version of the plantation mythology. By this, I mean Shirley and Mabel are full-bodied women with dominating personalities and quick-witted tongues, and employed in the service industry. Shirley works in food service and Mabel is a domestic employee. Mabel wears her hair straightened and is shown either in a work frock or jewelry and a print dress. Shirley on the other hand, sports an afro with a pick sticking out of it, wears denim skirts or jeans and t-shirts. In the early seasons, Shirley especially subverts the Mammy stereotype by working in a food establishment but not being a good cook; and being a protective figure for the teenagers (including Mabel’s children) who frequent her workplace, but also not appearing traditionally maternal. All in all, Shirley was an important forerunner in television representation of the masculine gender expression that populates the cast of *Between Women*. While she was not an overtly lesbian character, she definitely operated in the dyke tradition of wearing her masculinity on her sleeve. (This would change in the show’s revival episodes because Mabel does not return.)

***Courthouse* (CBS, 1995)**

This short-lived serial drama blazed through the sky like a shooting star: it shone brightly and then disappeared in a matter of moments. From *TV Guide*: “A decade before *Judging Amy*, this series similarly revolved around a tough but fair female judge. But this harder hitting, less sentimental drama failed to make its case to the audience and was canceled within two months.”¹⁸ In four of its eleven episodes, the traditionally feminine Jennifer Lewis, as

Judge Rosetta Reide, directly challenges the homophobic attitudes of her parents, and engages in a romantic relationship with guest character Danni, played by the equally femme Cree Summer.

***Girlfriends* (UPN/CW, 2000–2008)**

The widely popular sitcom was groundbreaking in its portrayal of a tight-knit group of mainly middle-class black professionals. Among its many positive traits, the show presents diversity in its characterization of black women. All of the women are traditionally feminine, and among them is the bisexual character Lynn Searcy (Persia White). Despite having five postgraduate degrees, Lynn, incongruously, lacks direction and ambition. Her free-spirited sexuality appears to be a trait of her flighty and capricious personality, a central character flaw that perpetuates a negative stereotype of bisexual people.

***Dark Angel* (FOX, 2000–2002)**

The lesbian character Original Cindy appeared as the lone sexual minority in this science fiction action series. Reviewer Sarah Warn determined that the character's disposition stands out because "we never see [her] in the tentative, confused-about-her-sexuality phase; both Original Cindy and her (heterosexual) friends exhibit a comfort and candidness about her 'alternative' sexuality that is still rarely seen on television." She is a complicated and dynamic character, according to Warn. "Like all good characters, Original Cindy is a mass of contradictions," Warn writes. "Both edgy and soft, sarcastic and kind, flawed and heroic."¹⁹ Besides speaking frankly and flirtatiously about her sexual inclinations, Cindy is allowed to kiss a woman in a single episode during its two-season run.

***The Wire* (HBO, 2002–8)**

This hard-hitting serial drama was heralded for its gritty realism and provocative storytelling. The cast was nearly equally balanced with white and nonwhite main characters. Among them were two masculine women, one of whom identified as a lesbian. Kima Griggs, played by Sonja Sohn, was an out lesbian, and confident and competent on her job as a police investigator. She was also a flawed and complicated character who was unfaithful to her long-term domestic partner. She is not completely isolated from the lesbian community; on multiple occasions she appears in a bar setting and/or in a group of other lesbian couples.

Kima's civilian counterpart was Snoop (Felicia Pearson), a street hustler-turned-hitman. Her penchant for loose fitting clothing, when combined with her low-toned voice, thick southern accent and street slang, allowed her to blend seamlessly into a gang of fearless men and reckless boys. So much so, in her first scene, Snoop wears a pink clothing to indicate her femaleness as she

rides away on a motorcycle after murdering someone in broad daylight. Pearson, who identifies as a lesbian, was an amateur when she agreed, in effect, to play herself on-screen.²⁰ In an interview, she brags, “I know how people down here [in Baltimore, where the show is set] do that slang and how they carry themselves [with] that swagger, period. My swagger is all the same, so it was just half me [and] half the character.”²¹ Truly one of the boys, Snoop never appears in a romantic or erotic scene, or among other female characters. However, at the end of season four, a police officer (Wendell Pierce) says in front of her, “I’m thinking about some pussy,” to which she replies, “Me, too.”

***The L Word* (Showtime, 2004–29)**

Groundbreaking in its own right, *L Word* was Showtime’s critically acclaimed, woman-centered answer to critiques of the network’s previous dramatic serial, *Queer as Folk* (2000–2005), which focused on a group of gay men. *Queer as Folk* was the first dramatic series to centralize the community and perspectives of gay, bisexual, and questioning male characters.²² Viewers voiced their displeasure that the “queer” perspective eclipsed its lesbian characters’ plotlines and ignored the existence of nonwhite people altogether. So in its next iteration of LGBT drama, Showtime placed lesbian lives front and center, and was careful to appear more racially/ethnically inclusive. It is not a true analogy but, because of its landmark status, in many ways *L Word* was the *Cosby Show* of woman-centered television series: Whereas *Cosby* was the black-cast answer to *Family Ties*, *L Word* was the queer-inflected answer to the success of *Sex and the City* and *Girlfriends*. And, like *Cosby*, because audiences had been starved for these kinds of characters from this perspective, the show was held to a level of authenticity and realism in ways that other shows in its genre were not.²³ Critiques and complaints about *L Word* mainly focused on its lack of diversity in gender expression and racial representation, and its pandering to the straight male gaze.²⁴ When the *L Word*’s run ended in 2009, its unscripted derivative, *The Real L Word*, appeared in its place with an overwhelmingly white cast (which it tweaked to various degrees of success in subsequent seasons). Still, *L Word* represents the Stabilization phase for white lesbian and bisexual characters. It does so, first, because it centralizes their membership in a queer kinship network and, second, because the writing blends, to varying degrees, flaws and heroism in its LGBT characters (yes, there is a trans character, too). Third, it highlights structural oppressions the women face as a marginalized sexual community, even as it celebrates their individual success.

The show features two African American characters, Bette Porter (Jennifer Beals) and Tasha Williams (Rose Rollins). Bette is an affluent, Ivy League-trained and highly successful director of an art gallery. Her dominant sexu-

ality is signified by a flawless high-end pantsuit collection, sexual infidelity and promiscuity, and assertiveness with women. Tasha, also a major character, appeared in the last two seasons of the show. On the spectrum of gender expression, Tasha is masculine of center. A member of the Army National Guard, Tasha's storyline focused on the military's codified homophobia, called "Don't Ask, Don't Tell," and its impact on service members' private lives. She is introduced through her friendship with the (problematic) Latina sex machine, called Papi (Janina Gavankar). In fact, Tasha and Papi are best friends within a group of lesbians of color. The basketball court serves as an ethnic and class neutral ground where the two groups (the show's main characters and Tasha's friends) meet in a friendly but competitive game that sparks mutual romantic interests. Once Tasha begins to date Alice, a white woman in Bette's inner circle, she is plucked out of that community of color and immersed in the white setting for the duration of the romantic relationship.

***True Blood* (HBO, 2008–14)**

GLAAD identified *True Blood* as the most inclusive show on television every year during its six-year run because it features six LGBT regular or recurring characters. A vampire story set in swampy Louisiana, the narrative adheres to generic expectations of vampire mythology in its eroticism and depiction of sexuality as fluid. The tomboy femme, Tara (Rutina Wesley) and her effeminate gay male cousin, Lafayette, are black characters in an environment in which "straight" is defined as same-species sexuality. Tara's sexual activity and affective relationships are bisexual, interracial, and, for a time, interspecies (with a vampire).

***White Collar* (USA Network, 2009–present)**

Diana (Marsha Thomason) is a FBI special agent in the white collar crimes unit and an out lesbian. Her wardrobe is not unlike that of other women law enforcement professionals on television: her slim frame is fitted with power suits and fashion boots. In season three, Diana proposed to her girlfriend, a character that Logo Network's site, *After Ellen*, describes as a "glamorous," "gorgeous," yet "oft-mentioned, [and] rarely seen" because, so far, she has only appeared in a single episode.²⁵

***Between Women* (BetweenWomenTV.net, 2011–13)**

As I said in the beginning of this essay, implicit in Berry's three-stage mainstreaming paradigm is a rejection of the singled-out minority character in an otherwise white- or straight-dominated setting as sufficient inclusion; and the recognition that inclusion which constitutes a compensatory and idealized minority presence is also problematic. A stabilized depiction oc-

curs when portrayals are somewhat realistic or complex and when the character interacts meaningfully within their minority community.²⁶ *Between Women* portrays black lesbian, bisexual, and questioning female characters on a spectrum of gender expression, romance interests, and character types. As an alternative view to the “real” lesbians of Showtime, producer/writer Michelle Daniel and director Christina Brown employ the Internet as a small-screen platform to disrupt hegemonic, whites-only, or interracial (read as more palatable) constructions of same-sex eroticism on television with a show premised on the idea that a circle of women who sleep with, live with, and/or fall in love with other women, will not all easily fit under the “lesbian” umbrella—and they definitely won’t all be white-skinned. Plotlines include serious topics, such as gender reassignment surgery, intimate partner violence, HIV testing, unwanted pregnancy, and financial instability. I contend that it operates in the realm of Stabilization because it situates the black bi/lesbian characters within a black LGBT community that is further ensconced inside the black cultural space of Atlanta, Georgia. Significantly, the show features a spectrum of black female masculinity that provides an opportunity to expand the visual representation of lesbian gender expression. Among the cast of eight regular and two recurring characters, four manifest a masculine aesthetic.

The virtue of having a spectrum of black female masculinity is that it generates multiple perspectives of the character type and, in doing so, provides more opportunity for play between the spaces of sexuality and gender expression. For example, Rae (played by the artist Look Alive), the charismatic, honey-tongued, unsigned rapper who is often swathed in stylish urban gear, may be the most subversive of stereotypical hip-hop masculinity. Her focus on an unlikely music career, coupled with a checkered employment history, creates problems in her romantic life. Yet she personifies loyalty and emotional commitment in her role as co-parent to her ex-lover’s son (fig. 1). In this way, she gives fuller meaning to the term *provider*, a word usually reserved for the heterosexual male parent’s economic contribution to the family unit, so that it includes the time and energy she pours into being a consistent, protective, and nurturing parent of a male child. It subverts the patriarchal paradigm that assigns these traits to the feminine parent, the paradigm that often informs the much-maligned butch/femme framework of lesbian romance. Another potentially subversive character is Sunny (Amber Jones) (fig. 2). Sunny is completely uncomfortable in her skin, a state of being symbolized by the multiple polar-opposite style changes in her wardrobe and hair styles, and general awkwardness. Perhaps her aesthetic unsettledness could be read as fluidity. Maybe she cannot “settle” into a prescribed type because her self demands the space to be renewed and redefined on a regular basis. Tellingly, when she is pictured with the cast, Sunny is identified as one of the



Figure 1. Rae (left), played by spoken-word artist Look Alive, blends hip-hop masculinity with nurturing, protective co-parenting in her relationship with ex-partner, Beautiful (Shamonique Mattox), and their son, Junior.



Figure 2. Sunny (Amber Jones) is a quirky character whose social challenges and aesthetics convey an unsettledness that, along with her identification with the bois on the show, destabilize conventional conceptions of black lesbian masculinity.

bois, a gesture supported by the fact that she seeks guidance from Miller, the suave socialite. These character types affirm Herman Gray's assertion that the proliferation of images of black masculinity in popular culture are destabilized by nontraditional conceptions of it, which "in their travels and circuits . . . [produce] cultural meanings and effects [that] are constantly shifting, open to negotiation, challenge, and rewritings."²⁷ Indeed, *Between Women* challenges traditional conceptions of black masculinity; most obviously, it contests the notion that masculinity belongs to men.

In addition to situating minority characters within their communities, the other important aspect of stabilized depictions is that storylines involve more realistic portrayals of the personal, social, or political problems lesbians face than are evident in the previous stages of representation. The first season of *Between Women* accomplishes this realism in the ways it juxtaposes garden-variety romantic relationship issues and other serious topics (listed above) with the contours of violence, spectacular and mundane, that occur in alarming rates in the lives of black women.²⁸ The unattached characters yearn for companionship, while those in committed relationships struggle with jealousy, financial insecurity, or parenting conflicts. Meanwhile, Sunny is assaulted at a transit bus stop in a scene reminiscent of the notorious murder of Sakia Gunn.²⁹ Another storyline involves intimate partner violence. Brooke (Ulita Hamilton) is a working class butch with a short fuse who dates an earthy, feminine social butterfly, Allison (Onyx Keesha). Brooke's possessiveness begins as aggressive probing and attempts to control Allison's daily movement, and escalates into emotional overreactions in public spaces. During one intense encounter, Allison demands that Brooke "get out of [her] face" to which Brooke responds: "You're my girlfriend. I do whatever it is I want with you." In a move which suggests the director wants to ensure that audiences do not mistake the decision to depict this behavior as a sign of tolerance for it, after a particularly brutal portrayal of physical violence in an episode, the actors break character to recite the following public service announcement: "Abuse is never okay. Abuse is physical, emotional, and economical. It is anything that intimidates, manipulates, terrorizes, hurts, humiliates, injures or wounds someone." What a tightrope walk this must be for Daniel and Brown, the creative visionaries behind the show, to address the issue of intimate partner violence and, simultaneously, attempt to minimize the possible damage of perpetuating the stereotype that black people are more prone to violence than other groups. (Or worse: that black—male or female—masculinity is inherently violent.) This raises the concern that, although the definition of violence the show provides is inclusive, the fact they stage the intervention *only* after illustrating a high level of physical abuse effectively minimizes the other forms of violence that other characters inflict or experience.

Mundane violence, mainly emotional and spiritual, is allowed to stand on its own, without a PSA or disclaimer. For example, Miller (Marisa Carpenter), the dapper, white collar alpha-stud, commits emotional violence through routine infidelity and cool demeanor of detachment in multiple relationships. Although she is in a long-term domestic partnership, she takes much pride in her seductive magnetism. She is very romantic and generously affectionate when in pursuit of sex, but becomes emotionally inconsistent if her efforts are fruitful. Miller selfishly stakes a sexual claim to multiple partners from which she can select to meet her immediate needs, but they cannot depend on her for intimacy beyond the sex act. The implicit message is that Brooke's actions define real violence because, in addition to the PSA that explains to audiences that her behavior is unacceptable, Brooke attends anger management therapy. Meanwhile Miller's emotional violence is treated, at worst, as a sign of immaturity. Her live-in lover, Rhonda (Domonique LaToy), repeatedly hints that she wants to get legally married. At best, Miller's behavior is treated as a badge of her masculinity. Her entrance into a room is often met with an envious glare from someone who feels competitive with her prowess and, on the other end of the spectrum, she has earned the unmitigated admiration of Sunny. A few episodes include comical scenes in which Sunny turns to Miller for dating and fashion advice.

The spiritual violence of religious-based homophobia is traced through Sunny's relationship with her mother. In one episode, her mother invites a spiritualist into their home, to Sunny's startled disappointment, to sanctify Sunny's room with chants, prayers, and holy water. In another episode, her mother insists that Sunny attend counseling for her perceived sexual deviance. Fortunately for Sunny, her mother had not properly researched the counselor and her hunt for a "cure" was thwarted when she was handed pamphlets with factual, non-judgmental information about human sexuality. This constant rejection could contribute to Sunny's lack of confidence and inability to find a version of herself that allows her to stand proudly. Based on their own definition, the entire season was a succession of damaging, violent behavior. Creating a PSA that isolates physical violence from other forms normalizes the other, equally damaging behaviors.

Obviously, none of this means that *Between Women* fails as a narrative. To the contrary, the series and the distribution platform, *BetweenWomenTV*, may be the digital gateway to an array of stabilized depictions that audiences have been waiting for. So far, alongside the full three seasons of *Between Women*, viewers can find short and feature-length films published on the site, such as the satirical "mockumentary," *My Mama Said Yo Mama's a Dyke*; the drama *If I Was Your Girl*; and *Girl Crush*, an animated talk show series; and it links to the individual artists' websites as well. As is, the network fills an important need for television audiences who have yet to see a version of

themselves reflected on the screen in a sustained manner; for those viewers who locate objects of fantasy and desire in these images; and for those who simply seek a spectrum of engaging and creative LGBT characters for entertainment's sake. BetweenWomenTV is poised to make a positive impact in the mainstreaming of masculine black lesbians. It has already begun to do the cultural work of "visibilizing" artists and their creative images of black queer women who mentor, nurture, fuck, love, motivate, marry, and parent each other in spite of a mainstream media culture that overwhelmingly pretends they do not exist.

Notes

1. "About BetweenWomenTV," *YouTube*, www.betweenwomentv.com, accessed March 21, 2012.
2. Michelle A. Daniel, "Between Women the Movie," *Kickstarter*, www.kickstarter.com/projects/michelledaniel/between-women-the-movie, accessed October 30, 2014.
3. Leyla Farah, "Checking in with 'Between Women' Creator Michelle Daniel," *AfterEllen*, May 25, 2012, www.afterellen.com/checking-in-with-between-women-creator-michelle-daniel/05/2012, accessed October 30, 2014.
4. George Gerbner et al. "Growing up with Television: Cultivation Processes," *Media Effects: Advances in Theory and Research*, 2nd ed., ed. Jennings Bryant and Doff Zillman. (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence J. Erlbaum Associates, 2002): 43–68.
5. George Gerbner et al. "The 'Mainstreaming' of America: Violence Profile No. 11," *Journal of Communication* 30, no. 3 (1980): 10–29.
6. Gordon L. Berry, "Television and Afro-Americans: Past Legacy and Present Portrayals," in *Television and Social Behavior: Beyond Violence and Children*, ed. Stephen Withey and Ronald Abeles (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1980): 231–47.
7. Amber Raley and Jennifer Lucas, "Stereotype or Success? Prime-Time Television Portrayals of Gay Male, Lesbian, and Bisexual Characters," *Journal of Homosexuality* 51, no. 2 (2006): 26.
8. *Ibid.*, 21.
9. bell hooks, *Reel to Reel: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996): 2.
10. GLAAD reports that *DeGrassi: The Next Generation* (TeenNick) was the single primetime broadcast series with a transgender character from 2010 to 2012. In 2014, there were none. Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, *2014 Where We Are on TV Report* (New York, NY, September 2014), 6. While they appear in the "streaming original series" category instead of broadcast television, the dramas *Orange Is the New Black* (Netflix) and *TransParent* (Amazon) are doing tremendous cultural work in this area.
11. Matt Kane, "GLAAD Study Records Highest Percentage Ever of LGBT Series Regulars on Broadcast Television, Cable LGBT Character Count Also Rises," *GLAAD*, October 5, 2012, www.glaad.org/releases/glaad-study-records-highest-percentage-ever-lgbt-series-regulars-broadcast-television-cable, accessed October 25, 2012.
12. The exception is a black lesbian character, Diana (Marsha Thomason) who is iden-

tified as part of a “supporting” cast, which is distinguished from leading, regular, and recurring roles. Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation, 2011–2012 *Where We Are on TV Report* (New York, September 27, 2011): 7.

13. Maria St. John and Cheryl Dunye, “Making Home/Making ‘Stranger’: An Interview with Cheryl Dunye,” *Feminist Studies* 30, no. 2 (Summer 2004): 327.

14. Kathleen Wilkinson, “Cheryl Dunye’s Women’s Prison Flick Ruffles Some Edges,” *Lesbian News* 27, no. 7 (February 2002): 35.

15. I am applying the entertainment industry’s definition of success as a way to gauge mainstream audiences’ interest in black-cast movies or those with a black lead actor. A movie is considered commercially successful if it makes enough profits from ticket sales to make up the cost of production. Any film that fails to recover its production budget is considered commercially unsuccessful. While DVD sales and streaming content contracts have affected these perceptions somewhat, the definition of a “box office sensation” remains the same.

16. St. John and Dunye, “Making Home/Making ‘Stranger,’” 327.

17. Although it merits inclusion in this discussion, the Netflix original series *Orange Is the New Black* premiered after this essay was initially submitted for publication.

18. “Courthouse,” *TV Guide*, www.tvguide.com/tvshows/courthouse/200696, accessed October 25, 2012.

19. Sarah Warn, “Dark Angel’s Original Cindy Lives up to Her Name,” *AfterEllen*, June 24, 2003, www.afterellen.com/dark-angels-original-cindy-lives-up-to-her-name/06/2003/, accessed October 30, 2014.

20. Pearson was recruited for the role after meeting a cast member in a nightclub. On the set of *The Wire*, she was directed to maintain her real-life affect and swagger on screen. For details, see Pearson’s memoir, *Grace After Midnight* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2009).

21. Dove, “The Wire Week: Felicia Pearson (Snoop),” *All HipHop*, January 10, 2007, allhiphop.com/2007/01/10/the-wire-week-felicia-pearson-snoop, accessed October 30, 2014.

22. *Tales from the City* is a mini-series based on Armistead Maupin’s novels. It aired on PBS and Showtime in 1994 and 1998, respectively. *Tales* deserves a mention because it set the stage for *Queer As Folk* by presenting a variety of non-normative sexual behaviors among neighbors in an apartment community, including a sympathetic view of same-sex experiences. *Queer as Folk* was the first television series to make the lives of gay-identified characters the central story.

23. Reactions to *The Cosby Show* generated popular and academic discourses that questioned the realism in its portrayal. In multiple interviews, Bill Cosby rejected the unequal burden of responsibility placed on racial minorities to highlight racism in art. See Leslie Innis and Joe Feagan, “The Cosby Show: The View from the Black Middle Class,” *Journal of Black Studies* 25, no. 6 (July 1995). Similarly, *L Word* creator Ilene Chaiken rejected “the idea that pop television is a political medium,” and refused to “take on the mantle of social responsibility.” See Allison Glock, “She Likes to Watch,” *New York Times*, February 6, 2005.

24. Susan Wolfe and Lee Ann Roripaugh, “(In)Visible Lesbians: Anxieties of Representation in the L Word,” *The L-Word: Outing Contemporary Television*, ed. Kim Akass and Janet McCabe (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2006): 43–54.

25. Lucy Hallowell, “‘White Collar’ Season Three Recap: What Diana’s Been Up To,”

AfterEllen, February 29, 2012, www.afterellen.com/white-collar-season-3-recap-what-dianas-been-up-to/02/2012/, accessed October 30, 2014.

26. This is not to say that it is totally unrealistic to see a member of a racial and/or sexual minority exist completely outside of their community. Many do. The implication here is that a minority-in-isolation approach maintains white or straight hegemony because it integrates the minority into the dominant culture and avoids asking audiences to fully identify with nonwhite or non-hetero cultures and identities.

27. Herman Gray, "Black Masculinity and Visual Culture," *Callaloo* 18, no. 2 (Spring 1995): 404.

28. African American women experience intimate partner violence at a rate 35 percent higher than that of white females, and about 2.5 times the rate of women of other races. Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Intimate Partner Violence: Attributes of Victimization, 1993–2011* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, November, 2013). In 2012, 20.6 percent of survivors and victims of violence identified as lesbian. Bisexual survivors and victims represented 8.7 percent of total survivors. National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs, *Hate Violence Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and HIV-Affected Communities in 2012* (NYC Gay & Lesbian Anti-Violence Project, 2013): 23.

29. Sakia Gunn is a fifteen-year-old girl who was murdered in Newark, New Jersey, in 2003 by Richard McCullough because she spurned his sexual advances by telling him she was a lesbian.

whose titles include *Cosmopolitan Modernisms* (2005), *Discrepant Abstraction* (2006), *Pop Art and Vernacular Culture* (2007), and *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers* (2008). He contributed "Postcolonial Trauerspiel" to *The Ghosts of Songs: The Film Art of Black Audio Film Collective* (ed. Kodwo Eshun and Anjalika Sagar, Liverpool University Press, 2007), is a former member of *Screen* editorial board, and has written widely on Black British independent cinema and film art, including "Angelus Diasporae" in *Isaac Julien: Riot*, published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 2013.

Marlon Rachquel Moore

Marlon Moore is an assistant professor of English and teaches African American literature at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. Her research is best described as African American LGBTQ studies with emphases in southern culture, literature of the supernatural, and twentieth-century writers. Her work has or will soon appear in *African American Review*, *Gender Forum*, *Critical Insights*, and various edited collections. She is author of *In the Life and in the Spirit: Homoerotic Spirituality in African American Literature* (State University of New York Press, 2014), an examination of fiction from 1963 to 1999.

Angelique V. Nixon

Angelique V. Nixon is a Fulbright Scholar with the Institute for Gender and Development at the University of the West Indies in St. Augustine, Trinidad and Tobago. She specializes in Caribbean and postcolonial studies, African diaspora literatures and cultures, and gender and sexuality studies. Her research, cultural criticism, and poetry have been published widely. She is co-editor of the online multimedia collection *Theorizing Homophobias in the Caribbean: Complexities of Place, Desire and Belonging*.

Manuela Ribeiro Sanches

Manuela Ribeiro Sanches received her PhD from the University of Lisbon in 1993. She is senior lecturer with the Faculty of Letters, University of Lisbon, and director of the Centre for Comparative Studies. She is also responsible for the scientific coordination of the website *ArtAfrica*. Her main areas of research are postcolonial studies, theories of anticolonialism, questions of multiculturalism and migration, and African film.

L. H. Stallings

L. H. Stallings is an associate professor of gender studies at Indiana University. She is the author of *Mutha' Is Half a Word!: Intersections of Folklore, Vernacular, Myth, and Queerness in Black Female Culture* (Ohio State University Press, 2007) and coeditor and contributing author to *Word Hustle: Critical*

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